

Regents promise transparency at ISU efficiency review forum

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Iowa State University president Steven Leath addresses the audience during a meeting of the Iowa State Board of Regents on the campus of Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa on Tuesday, April 1, 2014. (Photo: Charlie Litchfield/The Register)



Larry McKibben, member of the Iowa State Board of Regents, center, addresses the audience at an efficiency meeting of the Iowa State Board of Regents on the campus of Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa on Tuesday, April 1, 2014.(Photo: Charlie Litchfield/The Register)

Few students were present at a public forum Tuesday at Iowa State University to hear about an efficiency review that could repurpose tens of millions of dollars in spending at Iowa's three public universities.

The 90-minute meeting and question session, which was also streamed online, introduced ISU to representatives of Deloitte Consulting, the firm hired by the Board of Regents to conduct a \$2.5-million review of campus operations in order to identify areas the university can spend dollars more wisely under financial constraints.

"Higher education has undergone significant changes," ISU President Steven Leath told an audience of about 150 faculty and staff, "and we've had strained budgets for a number of years."

The goal of the review, said Leath, is to make Iowa State and Iowa's other public universities "sustainable for the long term."

Iowa Regents President Bruce Ratstetter said a priority for the study is that it is "open, inclusive and transparent." Regents have been taking questions via email and on Twitter, in addition to the forum today, a forum last week at University of Iowa, and another next week at University of Northern Iowa.

"Nothing is off the table," said Regent Larry McKibben, chair of the review committee. "We have no preconceived notions. We are going to listen and then we are going to process."

McKibben said curbing student debt is a major goal for the review. He calculated the average debt for an ISU student at \$29,324.

"That's an economic problem for the state of Iowa," McKibben said. "It is problem for students, it is a problem for families."

Rick Ferraro, director of Deloitte Consulting, charted a comparison of state appropriations for higher education shrinking over time as tuition has risen.

"The industry is losing its pricing power," Ferraro said. "It can't keep raising its prices."

The efficiency study will take place in three phases. In the first phase, which is already underway and will kick off at ISU the week of April 14, consultants will meet with stakeholders on campus, consider public input, and begin to tease out priorities to reduce costs. The phase should take 10 weeks, said Virginia Fraser, Deloitte's project manager for the Iowa study.

The second phase, which should begin in the summer, will develop a detailed "roadmap," pricing out options for cost-cutting and reinvestment, and should take 11 weeks.

Iowa regents hope to have a list of changes by the end of this year pulled from recommendations by the consultant, faculty, staff and the public. Cuts and a reorganization could start in 2015.

Audience questions, submitted anonymously, focused on the review process, and offered some preliminary suggestions, such as offering Saturday classes or allowing students to graduate in three years in order to shrink debt.

Some questions were concerned with elimination of academic programs and staff cuts.

The Regents and consultants each said those recommendations will come during the review process. A similar study in the late 1980s that cost \$1.25 million resulted in the examination of unnecessary duplication of academic programs at Iowa's three universities.

"There's no checklist of courses we'd like to cut," Ferraro said. "We don't work that way."

Ratstetter said he'd like to see the Regents create an oversight policy on the creation of new programs, "so we don't create three lookalike universities going forward."